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Oskanian, Kevork

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Kevork K. Oskanian[a]

[a]*Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom*

k.oskanian@bham.ac.uk

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This paper analyzes Western policies towards Russia from the realist perspective of E.H. Carr. The latter's critique of inter-war liberal 'utopianism' pointed to – among others – the tendency of liberal states to disregard the role of power in shaping an international normative order of their making; their discounting of contingency in favour of a progressive, teleological view of history; and their insensitivity to the structural inequalities reproduced by that order. These predispositions can also be observed in the liberal West's policies towards Russia in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. A teleologically expanding 'Kantian zone of peace' centred on the EU and NATO – and based on the liberal tripod of institutions, democracy, and free trade - became the core of Europe's de-facto security regime. Uncovering the power-political behind the normative, this Carrian perspective subsequently explains the gradual deterioration in relations between the West and the Kremlin through the latter's exclusion from institutions shaped at a time of its acute weakness, its inability to counter the symbolic power of democracy through political reforms, and its structural consignation to the semi-periphery of the globalized economic system. The article concludes by proposing a realist alternative for future engagement with Moscow.

Keywords: Russia; realism; NATO; EU; democracy; E.H. Carr

## Introduction

After the fall of the Soviet Union, several liberal assumptions took hold of strategic policymaking in Western capitals: that international security would now be bolstered through an ever-deepening array of laws and institutions; that democracy would inexorably spread throughout the world, bringing with it peace and stability; and that free markets, and ensuing interdependence, would further contribute to a more peaceful world. In Europe, the expansion of a Kantian 'zone of peace' – based on this "liberal tripod" of democracy, international institutions and interdependence (Russett and Oneal, 2001; Russett, Oneal, & Davis, 1998) – came to be seen as part of the inevitable progression of history. These quasi-teleological claims became enshrined in the post-Cold War European security order through

the eastward expansion of the EU and NATO; the deepening and widening of the continent's human rights regimes; and the predominance of free markets and free trade, both in the economic canon of Western policymakers, and the institution-building programmes aimed at the former Soviet satellites.

This system based on a stability borne from international legality, democratic rule, and economic interdependence is being challenged today as never before since the end of the Cold War: a 'crisis of liberalism' – exacerbated by Russia's great power revisionism – has disrupted many of the assumed links between institutions, democracy, interdependence and peace underlying the European security order. The upholding of international law by institutions like the UN and the OSCE has been confronted by the realities of Russia's conventional and hybrid interventions in Georgia and Ukraine (Allison, 2008, 2014). Democratisation in the former Communist bloc has stalled, and, in some cases, seen reversals, including within some Central European EU members (Carothers, 2002; Gel'man, 2006; Rupnik, 2016). Moreover, instead of supporting the existing security order, the purported advantages of economic interdependence have translated into a series of imbalances and inequalities that have left the European project vulnerable to populist challenges, in no small part supported by a Russia unable – or unwilling – to adapt to the exigencies of a liberal, globalised world.

While distinct, the challenges facing Europe's liberals[1] today do show certain parallels with those seen during the previous, ill-fated major experiment in 'idealism'

[1] Here, 'liberals' and 'liberalism' refer to a broad ideology emerging from the Western enlightenment, combining a belief in free individual reason with a preference for liberal democracy, free markets, and international institutions/international law as the foundations of international order. These ideas provide the core of the 'utopianism' criticised by Carr (2001, pp. 12-41) in his day, founded as it was on these three latter principles. As argued by Ikenberry and others, this 'liberalism' became the bedrock of the post-World War Two order envisaged by the United

preceding the Second World War. As during the 1930s, established international legal frameworks are being tested by an authoritarian, revisionist state through threats to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of newly independent, relatively powerless European states. Feeding off the imbalances in the liberal order, an 'illiberal international' is challenging fundamental values throughout Europe and beyond. Liberal states are confronted with a choice between upholding an established order – and risking all-out conflict – or allowing the challenge to stand, all the while seeing their own democracies challenged by a populist, anti-liberal wave. Parallels between the interbellum's 'twenty-years' crisis' of liberalism and its contemporary equivalent therefore abound.

Comparisons to the interbellum have become something of a ritual in recent decades: appeals to Munich, 1938 were, for instance, previously applied equally disparately to Iraq (Record, 2007), Kosovo (Paris, 2002), Iran (McCann, 2015), Syria (Dyer, 2016), and have now been reproduced in Ukraine by those advocating greater intervention (Traynor and MacAskill, 2014). These rhetorical exercises are usually applied in defence of the existing liberal order, obscuring the many taken-for-granted assumptions that have left this order vulnerable to decay and attack in the first place. In other words, the interbellum has become a cautionary tale providing arguments for forceful intervention in defence of liberalism, while leaving the weaknesses and blind spots that left the liberal order prone to destabilisation in the first place unquestioned.

In fact, rather than a straightforward admonition against appeasement, the inter-war years provide a much more nuanced narrative, in the person and thought of one of the rare realists of that particular era: E.H. Carr (2001, originally published in 1939). Carr's 'Twenty Years Crisis' remains a classic of the International Relations canon; the work – and the

States, and provided the Kantian normative core within the broader European project – largely confined in the non-Communist West during the Cold War (Ikenberry, 2009, 2012; Manners, 2008).

reactions it provoked – emerged at a time when a declining, broadly liberal international order was successfully being challenged by revisionist authoritarian powers. His critical brand of realism was aimed at uncovering the unequal power relations hiding behind moral and legal arguments of the liberals – or, as he somewhat polemically called them, 'utopians' – of his time. Carr railed against Versailles, and the ways in which the unequal power relations inherent to the inter-war European legal order were all too often cloaked in the language of moral superiority (pp. 172-174); he reminded his readers how, absent a sovereign, international laws and institutions were more often than not shaped according to the interests of the powerful, or, more concretely in his times, the victors of World War One, and how the breakdown of that system was a result of its inability to accommodate a humiliated and side-lined Germany, even under the liberal Weimar republic. Moreover, he attacked the liberal assumption of an alignment of interest among states and societies around free trade, which he saw as a crucial blind spot leading to dangerous inequalities, of which conflict and authoritarianism could freely feed (pp. 207-208). These arguments still stand as a major reminder of liberals' tendency to let claims to the international moral high ground distort their perceptions of a fundamental political reality: the entanglement of power with an international moral or legal order that might emerge during any given period of history.

In what comes below, I shall critically employ Carr's realist perspective to juxtapose the liberal claims inherent to Western policymaking in post-Cold War Eurasia with the – often overlooked – unequal relations of power enabling them. A first section will explore E.H. Carr's ideas on the liberal distortions and misperceptions of his age and argue for their applicability in the present. The next section will then examine the role of these liberal assumptions in the emergence of Europe's post-Cold War security order, based as it was on an ever-expanding Kantian zone of peace centred on NATO and the EU into what, because of Russia's relative impotence, had become a geopolitical vacuum. Despite liberal claims to the

contrary, power and geopolitics influenced the new order in manifold ways. On the one hand, its emergence was predicated on a particularly favourable balance-of-power. On the other hand, far from being purely moral givens, its taken-for-granted norms – democracy and the free market – then tilted that balance in the West's favour in a quasi-permanent manner, leaving a marginalised Russia to challenge it with 'hard' and 'hybrid' forms of power. The paper will conclude prescriptively, by positing a number of recommendations for Western policymaking based on Carr's ideas. It will point to the need for a revalidation of the realities of the power-political in policymaking through a reinforcement of the established EU/NATO-centred liberal 'core', combined with a new, 'thinner' legal and political order that acknowledges the more power-political nature of interaction in a largely post-liberal twenty-first century Eurasia.

**E.H. Carr: From Inter-War Idealism to post-Cold War Liberalism**

E.H. Carr is identified as one of the founders of the realist tradition in International Relations; and while his concern with *power* as the determining element in international relations indeed puts him firmly within that paradigm, it is all too often forgotten that his most important work – the 'Twenty Years Crisis' (2001) – emerged from a truth-to-power *critique* of idealism rooted as much in the traditions of Horkheimer and Gramsci, as those of Hobbes and Machiavelli. For Carr, the analysis of international politics from the perspective of power was not something done for its own purpose. His goal was to enable a politics that would be able to accommodate peaceful change by uncovering the *real* drivers of international politics – *power* and *interest* – behind claims to moral superiority. In an anarchic world, the realities of power could not be circumvented through law and institutions, and policymakers would, in the first instance, have to always keep an eye on these realities, at the risk of leading their states into unnecessary wars.

If Carr was a realist, he certainly was one with a strong critical slant, seeing the uncovering of unequal power relations behind claims to moral and legal superiority as an essential element in maintaining the peace (Cox, 1981; Howe, 1994; Linklater, 2001). And he lived at a time when such claims to superiority abounded, at least in those states that had not fallen prey to the totalitarian and authoritarian tendencies of the decade preceding the publication of the *Twenty Years' Crisis*. The League of Nations may have been utterly ineffective *in practice*; in theory, it nevertheless remained the focus of morality and legality for the 'well-thinking' section of the international community. By the 1930s, the oppressive nature of Versailles may have been acknowledged by many; others nevertheless clung to its precepts in the name of retributive justice, or, simply, out of policy inertia (Carr, 2001, p. 201). And many of the newer states in Central and Eastern Europe – including those at the centre of the systemic crisis, Czechoslovakia and Poland – at least partly owed their existence to Woodrow Wilson's dogged adherence to the liberal principle of self-determination (p. 46).

The problem, according to Carr, lay in the fact that the inter-war arrangement had been designed by the victors, whose moralistic language on 'international law' and 'peace' hid a largely self-interested effort aimed at maintaining the post-War status quo, and their superior position within it. In Carr's words:

> Just as the ruling class in a community prays for domestic peace, which guarantees its own security and predominance, and denounces class war, which might threaten them, so international peace becomes a special vested interest of predominant Powers. In the past, Roman and British imperialism were commended to the world in the guise of the pax Romana and the pax Britannica. To-day, when no single power is strong enough to dominate the world, and supremacy is vested in a group of nations, slogans like 'collective security' and 'resistance to aggression' serve the same purpose of proclaiming an identity of interest between the dominant group and the world as a whole in the maintenance of peace (p. 76).

Versailles – a 'diktat' signed 'under duress' (pp. 172-3) – was thus not so much an effort at

'justice' as an attempt to prime the European balance of power against a German resurgence (p. 142); and, for all its ineffectiveness – mostly blamed on the illusory nature of the alignment of interests around international peace – the League of Nations system served to fortify the status-quo with misguided appeals to the moral power of 'international public opinion' (pp. 125-6). Carr similarly rejected the universal applicability of liberal democracy, arguing that its imposition on 'countries whose stage of development and practical needs were utterly different from those of Western Europe' inevitably resulted in 'sterility and disillusionment' (p. 29). Wedded to this vision was Carr's overall rejection of the principles of free trade in the international political economy as, once again, an instrument of the economically dominant and industrialised against the weak and underdeveloped (Carr, 1948, p. 18; 2001, pp. 42-61). Self-interest became cloaked in a language of morality and legality, of commonality of interest, which, far from being a cynical legitimising device, was actually *believed* by many of the idealist promoters of these policies: interest and power thus shaped law and morality surreptitiously, in a fortuitous coincidence unremarked by the liberals themselves.

Carr criticised the tendency of 'utopians' to think in moral absolutes and forget the historically contingent nature of all human thought. For Carr, 'the morality of a dominant group [was] always distorted by the perspective of its self-interest, and it [identified] that interest with absolute and universal good' (Carr, 1948, p. 17). Omniscience was, moreover, 'unattainable because thought is always in some degree conditioned by historical circumstance…Yet he [Carr] observed in political and intellectual leaders, and indeed in society at large, the disturbing tendency to extrapolate beyond their ken, to make spurious claims of universal legitimacy' (Howe, 1994, pp. 279-280). With 'every working concept of morality…tainted with power' (Carr, 1948, p. 16), the alternative to accepting peaceful

international change was therefore often waging unnecessary wars justified in terms of moral absolutes.

Instead, he proposed a 'longue durée' view of ideas and concepts, and a pragmatic, materially and historically grounded approach to international politics, one that moved as circumstances changed. It was, indeed, realism's open-ended nature, and its sense of historical and material proportion that endowed it with a measure of intellectual humility and openness (Carr, 2001, pp. 62-65). Pragmatic unpretentiousness trumped ideological assertiveness as the guiding principle of statecraft, because 'readiness to fight to prevent change [was] just as unmoral as readiness to fight to enforce it. To establish methods of peaceful change [was] therefore the fundamental problem of international morality and of international politics' (pp. 201-202).

These arguments are often forgotten when interventionist liberals refer to Munich, 1938, or the rise of fascism as the only major lessons of the inter-war period for the second decade of the twenty-first century. For Carr, Chamberlain's failed attempts at maintaining peace in his time were only part of the story leading up to World War Two: the counterproductive nature of many liberal assumptions and a constant disregard for the shifting sands of power were *also* factors that set the scene for Hitler's rise to power and Europe's road towards conflagration. Maintaining the ultimately paralysing myth of a morally superior 'commonality of interest' in the League of Nations was instrumental in this lead-up to World War Two; the uncritical adherence of many liberals to the status-quo of Versailles underlay the German turn towards cynical power-politics once its capabilities had been restored (p. 201); and a similarly distorted belief in *laissez-faire* –'the paradise of the economically strong' (p. 57) – had obscured the inequities that eventually resulted in the rise of economic nationalism.

There are, of course, considerable differences between the post-World War One and post-Cold War European arrangements. For one, absent anything resembling the European Union, the Europe of the 1920s and 1930s was still very much one of *nation-states*; there was nothing comparable to NATO, no security mechanisms similar to the OSCE's, or comprehensive human rights regimes akin to the Council of Europe's. In this era of totalitarianism, the continent was moreover far less uniformly democratic; and no-one is today subjected to the kind of reparations imposed by Versailles on Germany. The values driving the inter-war idealists were, nevertheless, identifiably similar to those underwriting today's far more densely institutionalised liberal European order. The underlying idea is that accountable government, international law and institutions, and free trade – three elements that Russett and Oneal (2001; 1998) have referred to as the 'tripod of the liberal peace' – can overcome the power politics of the past. These principles have indeed been realised to a far greater degree in the present than in the 1930s. This does not mean, however, that they have moved beyond the vulnerabilities identified by Carr in his time, especially those emerging from a disregard for the complex nexus tying liberal international order to power, inequality and self-interest.

A commonality of interest between the West and Russia around a broader liberal normative framework was, for a long time, *assumed a priori*, based in no small part on the belief that liberalism was 'the only game in town' following the end of the Cold War. The teleological assumption that, absent a rational alternative, the states of the former Soviet Union – including Russia – would move towards a liberal model, was predicted by the multiple versions of *transition theory* in vogue at the time. As a result, Western policymakers nonchalantly underestimated the extent to which this broader normative order was based on the contingencies of the moment. As pointed out by Carr, a realist understanding of politics would have been acutely aware of the temporally limited nature of

utopian systems of thought and the dependence of their realisation on a favourable balance of power. In fact, liberals' belief in the moral superiority of democracy and democratisation ended up obscuring their roles in exacerbating the very real power differentials between themselves and those powers less prone to democratising, leading the latter to use *hard and hybrid power* tools in an effort to compensate. Quite paradoxically, this turned *democratisation* into an object of geopolitics rather than a harbinger of a Kantian peace.

The international legal and institutional framework emerging from liberalism's perceived Cold War victory was thus based on an underestimation of the enabling role of *power*, in favour of a sense of historical, moral, and rational, inevitability on the part of much of the West's overwhelmingly liberal policymaking community. The idea that European security required the eastward expansion of the Kantian zone of peace represented by NATO and the EU downplayed the very differently defined national interests of a weakened Russia. In fact, as will be argued in the following sections, the 'democracy' norm condemned a Russia that was unable to adapt to lower status, something anathema to its long-term self-perception as a great power. Similarly, liberals' blindness to the unequal impacts of a *laissez-faire* economics – extensively critiqued by Carr in his time – led them to underestimate the severe impact of their reforms on the Russian population, which, in turn, discredited the liberal project within Russia and condemned the erstwhile superpower to the status of what Morozov has referred to as a 'subaltern empire' in the semi-periphery of the global economic system. It is to these themes – the power-political implications of *institutions*, *democracy* and the *free market* – that the next section will turn.

**Institutions, Democratisation and Free Markets as *Power***

Liberal perceptions on Europe's legal and institutional architecture found their origins in the nature of the Soviet Union's retreat from its former sphere of influence in Central and Eastern

Europe. With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and, subsequently, the Soviet system, an *ideological* and *institutional* void opened up between NATO and the former Soviet Union. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the relative ease with which the former then expanded into that void, and the weakness of a crisis-prone USSR and Russia gave power-politics a far smaller role in *Western* policymakers' discourses than an openly proclaimed mission to remake the world. 'End of History's' promise gave the impression that a common-sense consensus on liberal international institutions – constructed around the norms of *democracy* and the *free market* – would underlie the brave new world. But a commonality of interest around such a norms-based order was, more often than not, assumed – an assumption that became more difficult to maintain when the liberal project entered into conflict with Moscow and its very different, power-political view of international affairs.

Democracy and free markets became the ideological cornerstones of Western policy towards the 'New Europe'. Liberal claims in the academe were reflected, however imperfectly, and in admittedly simplified form, in a policymaking orthodoxy: promoting the spread of democracy and the market became an explicit – and sometimes pervasive – part of subsequent American (and other Western) National Security Concepts and policy documents (see, e.g. European Union, 2003; USA, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2015). The oft-expressed expectation was that, with the gradual spread of democracy and trade, Europe would finally be able to lay aside the complications of its past, as its nation-states became subsumed into a community of prosperous democratic states. In the words of then US president Clinton (1994):

> [Liberalism sought] to increase the security of all, to erase the old lines without drawing arbitrary new ones, to bolster emerging democracies, and to integrate the nations of Europe into a continent where democracy and free markets know no borders but where every nation's borders are secure.

This democratising and liberalising agenda came to be inextricably linked with the emerging institutional infrastructure on the continent, again based on an inherently liberal logic: organisations which, during the Cold War, had been set up to monitor, uphold, or promote human rights – like the Council of Europe and the OSCE – came to include mechanisms aimed at *democracy-promotion* within a growing number of members and candidate members (Glover, 1995; Zielonka and Pravda, 2001). But more significantly, the core of Europe's *de-facto* security regime came to be based on the 'prefab multilateralism' (Sarotte, 2011) provided by NATO and the European Union, with democratisation and economic liberalisation among the central ideological requirements for membership. Existing Western institutional arrangements were simply expanded eastwards, imposed 'as is', creating what Sakwa (2017, p. 412) has referred to as a 'monological trap', a logic that was both path-dependent and devoid of self-critique.

And yet, contrary to what was often claimed, all three legs of this liberal tripod had clear power-political implications. This was perhaps most obviously the case for the first, institutional leg, founded on NATO. Remarkably, however, these power-political implications were systematically denied and obfuscated as the Alliance expanded eastward. Less obvious but equally important were the power-political implications of the more normative elements of *democracy* and the *free market*. In fact, in their very specific ways, they were both enabled by an overwhelming dominance of the West, while at the same time reinforcing the West's hegemony over the rules of the game governing the continent. Let's take a closer look at each of the three legs of this liberal project in turn.

### *Ignoring the Power-Political 1: Institutions*

Western liberals were, at first, conscious of Russian objections to NATO expansion, and therefore proceeded carefully in the early 1990s. But as the decade progressed and the issue found its place firmly on the West's agenda, any Russian protestations were usually

dismissed or minimised by rationalising them within the framework of a simplistic dichotomy between Yeltsin's reformers on the one hand, and nationalist or conservative 'reactionary forces' on the other (Talbott, 2002: 217-250; Federal News Service, 1997a). These assumptions persisted long after Russia's own liberal moment – in the early 1990s – had passed, unable to re-define the country's foreign and security interests away from the realist templates held by the vast majority of its foreign policy establishment (Blank, 2010, p. 37; Dannreuther, 1999; Williams and Neumann, 2000, p. 359). Russia's acute weakness and personalised policymaking centred on the increasingly erratic Boris Yeltsin allowed the West to disregard this fact, at least for a while. Concessions were pushed through based on the assumption that, over the longer term, Russia's president would be able to 'sell' them or impose them onto the other parts of Russia's state machinery, who would just have to accept the emergent situation. This was neither an arrangement based on attitudinal change, or one that left the vast majority of Russians – whether in the elite or outside of it – seeing themselves as having a stake in a genuinely inclusive security system, incidentally much like large swathes of the German elite and population during the inter-war years.

Russia's input in this emerging security architecture in the 1990s was, thus, at best reactive and peripheral. In spite of all – mostly symbolic – 'consultative' add-ons, the NATO/EU-based Kantian security order had presented Russia with a fait accompli. Several developments then made the resulting order untenable in Russia's eyes. First, with the Kosovo intervention, the extent to which the Kremlin had found itself marginalised in Europe's security architecture 'hit home' in Moscow (Antonenko, 2007; Averre, 2009). While this initially led to a cautious foreign policy and some pragmatic co-operation with the West, Russia's economic and military revival under Putin (more on which below) eventually enabled the aggrieved and far from converted foreign policy establishment to push back with an alternative security project. Moreover, Western encroachment into the former Soviet

Union – into which both NATO and the EU started expanding their democratising and liberalising logics from the early-mid 2000s – heightened the urgency for a response (Mankoff, 2007). And indeed, when, with the colour revolutions, NATO and the EU seemed poised to expand this security system towards what Russia still perceived as its 'sphere of privileged interest' (Trenin, 2009), relations between Moscow and Western capitals deteriorated rapidly.

Putin's Munich speech (2007) was perhaps the watershed moment in Russia's move away from attempts to reconcile itself with the Western-dominated post-Cold War order. Liberal surprise at this seemingly sudden rejection of the status-quo conveniently papered over many of the long-standing assumptions that underlay Europe's post-Cold War arrangement, assumptions that had emerged during the triumphalist early 1990s, and had, by the end of the decade, culminated in the oft-expressed idea that the Alliance's eastward expansion was 'in Russia's own interest' (Federal News Service, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998). Enabled by the relative ease with which the West expanded into the political vacuum that Central and Eastern Europe had become in the aftermath of 1989, the illusion of a shared, rational interest in the seamless functioning of the institutional order had persisted as NATO expanded into the former Soviet Union, and even – as evidenced in the reactions to Putin's Munich outburst – in the face of explicit Russian assertions to the contrary.

Thus, according to one senior US official, Russia had to 'understand that NATO is not and has not been, for the history -- for the many years since 1989, '90 and '01, directed at all against Russia, but is the one uniquely unifying force for peace and stability in Europe itself' (Federal News Service, 2007). German officials stressed how 'both sides need each other', obviating the need for a 'second Cold War', pointing to the partnership between Russia and NATO, and dismissing Putin's speech as 'macho talk' (BBC Monitoring, 2007a) or posturing characteristic of former spies (Deutsche Presse Agentur, 2007). An American

senator perhaps provided the clearest example of the amalgamation of universal Kantian normativity with geopolitics: for Lieberman, Putin's assertion that there was 'one single center of power-in the world' was 'correct. But that power [was] not the United States. It [was] the power of freedom' (States News Service, 2007). The general theme of previous years – that there was no fundamental conflict of interest between a benign, democratising NATO, and Russia – was maintained, while the overwhelmingly positive response to the speech in Russia's elite was ignored (BBC Monitoring, 2007b; Russia & CIS General Newswire, 2007a, 2007b).

This disjuncture between the realities of power and ideologically conditioned perceptions had been a major factor in Carr's critique of the 'utopian' inter-war years, when, similarly, liberals assumed that Weimar Germany's submission to the Versailles system had been the result of a reasonable adaptation to a new world order, and its corollary of a fundamental 'harmony of interests' between states. Carr's dismissal of the liberal assumption that rational states and statesmen are interested in peace at all times and at any cost stood at the centre of his critique of the utopian order of his time. His warning that only those who had actively shaped a given institutional and legal framework had an active interest in the peaceful order it produced appeared to have been forgotten, leading to all kinds of assumptions and misperceptions of Moscow's intentions, not least the assumption that Russia's objections to NATO enlargement could be dismissed as 'unreasonable', and therefore largely ignored as irrelevant, much like a weak Weimar Germany's objections to Versailles had been ignored in Carr's times.

### *Ignoring the Power-Political 2: Democratisation*

In the years following the first major expression of the breakdown in Russian-Western relations – the 2008 Russo-Georgian War (Cheterian, 2010; Cornell and Starr, 2009;

Kakachia, 2009) – the role of NATO diminished in favour of the European Union. Alliance expansion into the former Soviet Union was put on the back burner and Brussels' European Neighbourhood Policy was upgraded to its Eastern Partnership. The oft-expressed expectation was that the resulting *normative* expansion of the democratic and commercial peace could not possibly be objected to by Moscow as the extension of a geopolitical 'sphere of influence'. Surely, sovereign states should be able to choose political-legal models and economic ties at will, and such free choice did not constitute geopolitics-as-usual?

At least, this was the idea repeatedly echoed by European policymakers at the time. In the words of EU Commission President Barroso, 'the time of spheres of interest in Europe was over ... All the countries in Europe are free to choose where they want to be and with whom they want to work' (Deutsche Presse Agentur, 2009). These sentiments were echoed in numerous speeches, among others by Germany's and Poland's foreign ministers (BBC Monitoring, 2009; States News Service, 2009). For Štefan Füle (2013), then European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, 'Russia [would] also benefit greatly from the integration of the Eastern Partnership countries into the wider European economy', while those calling on him to engage in 'strategic games' had to be rejected. His business was not engaging in 'zero-sum games' but in 'promoting the [EU] values more robustly', as he was 'a believer in win-win games, particularly in dealing with such a strategic partner as Russia'. Such sentiments – denying the geopolitical natures of both NATO and the EU – were also frequently expressed by US officials (e.g. Federal News Service, 2009, 2010).

To the surprise – and frustration – of many (e.g. Bildt, 2015, pp. 9-11; Füle, 2014), Russia maintained its objections even to these purely normative and economic forays, setting up the Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative and actively thwarting EU-Europe's efforts at integrating its 'Eastern neighbourhood', eventually leading to the ongoing conflict

in Ukraine. The problem was that, in their views of both the European Union, and – arguably to a lesser extent – NATO, Western policymakers remained guided by the same liberal logics that denied the power-political implications of their normative project. Thus, while remaining true to one of their organisation's fundamental values – the denial of power-politics – EU policymakers appeared oblivious to the very geopolitical implications of the *civilian* modernising-cum-pacifying project they were promoting. As norms undergirding a very specific – liberal - status-quo, 'democracy' and 'free markets' had important *power-political* consequences that remained often overlooked by their Western proponents. Viewed from a critical Carrian perspective, their promotion was not based on a selfless adherence to a higher morality; instead, they had subtle but significant power-political implications, as explained below.

Carr himself rejected the positive-sum rationality often attributed by liberals to free trade, arguing that they more often than not skewed the field in favour of established industrial powers. Systematic critiques of the 'democratic peace' were largely absent in Carr's work, but a similar rejection of a commonality of interest in the pacifying virtues of democratisation could be made based on a similar logic: namely, that democracy as a norm gives a subtle, but quite relevant *power-political* advantage to mature democracies, or states able to rapidly democratise. Indeed, for Carr, 'power in international politics [was] commonly thought of as a bludgeon working by methods of compulsion or oppression; the better analogy [was] sometimes a magnet working by involuntary attraction' (Carr, 1948, p. 16). And these powers of 'involuntary attraction' were at work in both the political and economic aspects of the West's interaction with the former Soviet space. The subtly, but significant power-political aspects of democracy and free markets were of direct consequence to Russia, which was unable – for a number of reasons – to either develop a mature

democracy, or transition to a competitive free market, with detrimental consequences for its position within the resulting order.

Liberal assumptions on the democratic peace and democracy as a shared interest ignored the very different Russian perspectives on these two issues. An academic questioning of the democratic peace became a recurring feature of Russian scholarship, and part and parcel of the basic world-view of its elites, where this typically liberal notion had gained very little traction in any case (see Izgarskaya, 2008; Salikov, 2012, 2013; Tsygankov, 2005). More than that, however, rather than it being a matter of scepticism towards the various claims of the 'democratic peace' (a scepticism which also emerged in Western scholarship; see, e.g., Henderson, 2002; Layne, 1994; Mansfield and Snyder, 2005; Zakaria, 1997), Russia's eventual rejection of the 'democratisation' norm – after futile attempts to conform to it in the 1990 – was amplified by democracy's power-political implications, implications that liberals tended to ignore. In fact, the democratisation requirement established a *normative* hierarchy distinguishing strongly between fully, semi- and non-democratic states in the Western reaches of Eurasia. Ostracism resulted from an *inability* or *unwillingness* – as in Russia's case – to move up that ladder.[2] This had serious consequences for Russia. Its failure to democratise put it at a power-political disadvantage in an ever-subtle

[2] This power-political aspect of 'democratisation has been captured in critical German research programme on the 'democratic peace', which examines the exclusionary and hierarchical practices inherent in its distinction between 'democracies' and 'non-democracies'. According to Geis (2006, p. 142), 'the scientific debate on democratic peace […] obscures all the exclusionary political discourses and practices that are not in accordance with the positive self-image of democracies'. In a Bourdieusian vein, Goetze (2006) moreover describes how liberal democracy has helped maintain a highly stratified international political field, where a select group of mature democratic – but also wealthy, and militarily powerful – states dominate, holding a monopoly of access to economic and social capital, and, therefore, both material and symbolic power. Viewed from that perspective, the liberal idea that democratisation is merely normative, divorced from the power- and geo-political becomes much less tenable.

way, by condemning it to, at most, a semi-peripheral status. Democracy held powers of attraction, and, from that perspective, was a very relevant, geopolitical factor, without which Russia could simply not compete on an equal footing, especially in the post-Cold War European context.

The implication of the above is that the liberal assumption of a shared rational interest in 'democratisation' thus under-estimates the extent to which the interest in democracy displayed by those outside the small group of mature democracies was dependent upon the contingent confluence of *norms* and *power* in the immediate post-Cold War years, and the inherent attractions of 'democracy' in the form of the social capital and symbolic power it accorded the 'democratic community of states'. States and societies gravitated towards democratic forms of government not simply because they saw it as inherently *good*, but also because – as in the case of Eastern European states – it granted them membership and the protection of a security community centred on a powerful elite.[3] For those countries unable or unwilling to democratise – like Russia – democratic forms of government became a source of diminished prestige, a lack of symbolic power with significant consequences for the always power-conscious Russians, and their ability to compete with this democratic elite in what they still saw as a zero-sum world.

### *Ignoring the Power-Political 3: Free Markets*

As in Carr's times, liberals were thus over-estimating the uniform acceptance of universal values and interests, whether in the case of the institutions that emerged in post-Cold War

[3] Thus, 'the nascent identity of the liberal democratic Czech Republic was as much sustained through the narrative of the Czech ''Return to [democratic] Europe'', as it was through the ''othering'' against both the communist totalitarian past and the present of inimical Russia' (Kratochvíl, Cibulková, & Beneš, 2006, p. 502). Comparative quantitative studies in Central and Eastern Europe also found a correlation between a fear of Russia and support for Westward integration, including the attendant reforms (Kostadinova, 2000).

Europe, or of Western liberal democracy or democratisation. But liberals had an additional blind spot identified by Carr: one related to their ideology's inherent inequalities and contradictions, especially when it came to the free market's effects on states and populations outside the core of industrialised capitalism. As Russia went through a decade of socio-economic hardship punctuated by kleptocracy and saw its economy marginalised into, at most, the semi-periphery of globalised capitalism, liberals remained surprisingly oblivious to the very different interpretations of the neoliberal laissez-faire economy among Russia's elites and its population. Liberalism's inherently positive-sum view of the free market contrasted sharply with the Russian zero-sum experience of socio-economic dislocation and structural disadvantage, a difference in perspectives captured by Carr's critique of his 'utopian' contemporaries decades beforehand.

Russia's economic revival immediately following the turbulent 1990s – which ordinary Russians perceived through the lens of economic shock and 'prikhvatizatsiya'[4] – was based mainly on a recovery in the price of the natural resources that still lay at the centre of an uncompetitive economy. The Kremlin was, however, soon confronted with the limits set by the Russian economy's lack of competitiveness, and the limited attraction an energy-based rentier economy could hold in the so-called 'near abroad', certainly when compared with the developed economies of the West (Gustafson, 2012; Hashim, 2010; Kirkham, 2016). Subsequent efforts at developing and rebalancing the economy were, primarily, about addressing these deficits in *economic* forms of power in ways compatible with both the hegemonic liberal environment, and a set of inherently power-political objectives – military reform, continued preponderance within the former Soviet space - which had been fairly

[4] A sarcastic neologism constructed through a combination of the Russian words for 'grab' and 'privatisation' (see Andreff, 2003, pp. 50-52).

constant since the end of the brief liberal foreign policy experiment of the early 1990s (see Kremlin.ru, 2009).

In the end, Russia's efforts at modernisation remained a very partial and superficial affair. Except for a few successes within the defence industry, the many attempts to address the continued dependence on natural resources– especially during the Medvedev 'interlude' between 2008 and 2012 – failed to overcome substantial structural impediments (Guriev and Zhuravskaya, 2010; Rutland, 2013). This prompted some analysts to relegate economic reforms to the realm of 'science fiction' (Pynnöniemi, 2014) or dismiss them as 'Potemkin modernisation' (Shevtsova, 2010).

Failed reform condemned Russia to remain outside the core of advanced nations in the economic as well as the political sense: an unacceptable position for any state as wedded to great power status as Russia. Economic realities have confined Russia to the status of what Morozov (2013, 2015) has referred to as a 'subaltern empire': an entity which remains a great power by virtue of its sheer geo-strategic bulk, but stays firmly excluded from the core of the global capitalist system, and, therefore, is less attractive as an alternative power pole in international affairs. Russia lacks both broad-spectrum economic and normative power, and its elites remain painfully aware of that fact, especially as an increasing number of former satellites have 'defected' to the much more powerful – in the multi-dimensional sense of the word – West, whether by aspiring to NATO membership, or by engaging with the EU's 'Eastern Partnership' (Kubicek, 2009; Molchanov, 2016; Trenin, 2002).

All of this set the stage for the turbulent relations between the West and Russia following Putin's 2007 outburst in Munich. Unable to reform its economy and political system in ways that would counteract the attractiveness of the West through its own 'powers of attraction', Russia had to rely on its *hard* power capabilities to redress this imbalance, using economic blackmail and 'hybrid' military power to achieve its objectives in Georgia,

Armenia, Ukraine and elsewhere (Götz, 2016; Shirinyan and Ralchev, 2013; Wilson, 2014). Moscow's interests hadn't changed: in fact, they had been fairly constant since the end to the brief liberal experiment in the early 1990s. What had changed was its ability to counteract the perceived encroachment on those interests by the West. That these developments led to charges of their leaders 'living in another world' (Traynor and Wintour, 2014), or behaving 'in nineteenth-century fashion' (Dunham, 2014) was not surprising in light of the liberal status-quo assumptions on the validity of existing norms, institutions, and economic relations, and the Western idea that these were perceived as a positive-sum game by all involved. Since the end of the Cold War, the West had, in fact, unlearned the harsher logics of geopolitics through a taken-for-granted order shaped by itself. But this order was never accepted by the Kremlin, either during the Yeltsin or the Putin years. Its earlier attempts to engage with Western institutions notwithstanding, the Kremlin had always been, at its heart, a hotbed of realist power-politics. That this was felt like a 'different world' to the liberal West is far from surprising.

This returns our discussion to E.H. Carr's treatment of a previous group of 'utopian' liberals, and their insensitivity to the realities of power and the historically contingent nature of knowledge, in light of their privileged position in an international political and economic system shaped mainly by themselves. Carr warned of the free market and laissez-faire economics as one of liberalism's important blind spots. Far from being a system which guaranteed gains for all, it in effect privileged those at the core of any resulting political economy. The Russian case is no different: post-Cold War liberals expected the Russian elite's rationalism to conform to their own order, blinded by the historically conditioned structural advantages – both in terms of political, economic and 'soft' forms of power – granted them by their position within the OECD 'elite' of globalisation. Without this privilege, the Kremlin remained acutely aware of the relevance of power to the political

processes of the liberal age; once these processes started encroaching on its core interests – which had remained fairly constant throughout – conflicts were the inevitable result.

**Conclusion: Revalidating Realism in the Wider Europe**

Applied to the present, Carr's critical version of realism reveals the extent to which liberal assumptions time and again distort and disguise the role of *power* in shaping the laws and institutions, political norms, and economic structures whose legitimacy and equity are so often taken for granted. In that sense, the period following the end of the Cold War presents a repetition of history, exposing what appears to be a number of perennial liberal blind spots. Liberalism tends to ignore the historically contingent, power-political aspects in the institutional shaping of international orders, the spread of democracy, and the workings of free markets. Instead, in the inter-war years as today, liberalism imbues these three fundamental elements of its world-view with universal, purely moral connotations, resulting in the kind of wishful thinking observed among the utopians of the 1920s and 1930s, and, as documented above, the liberals of post-Cold War Europe.

Specifically, this essay pointed to three assumptions, dating from an era when liberalism was triumphant, that have to be abandoned in favour of a much more flexible approach, one fully acknowledging the role of *power* – in all its complex forms, including symbolic and structural – in international affairs: firstly, the supposition that an implicit regime centred on a 'thick' legal-institutional and normative framework, and supported by an ever-expanding NATO and EU can continue to be the lynchpin of pan-European security in spite of realities having moved on from the 'End of History'; secondly, the 'end-of-history' expectation that democracy's inevitable spread would come to pacify the continent in the post-Cold War era; and thirdly, the presumption that processes integrating Russia into the global political economy would be seen in positive-sum terms in Moscow, as in the West.

Addressing this crisis of liberalism will also require a measure of introspection and reflection on the institutional aspects of Europe's post-Cold War security arrangements. Indeed, the most directly relevant aspects of Carr's critique appear to lie in its call to acknowledge the dangers in failing to discern the co-mingling of *power* and *self-interest* with political and economic normativity, and the denial of historical contingency in the creation of international order(s). In that regard, Europe's post-Cold War order was no different from the one confronting Carr in the 1920s and 1930s, when utopians also held onto outdated mechanisms because of a misguided belief in morally ordained 'progress' from which there could not be any retreat. A Carrian realist perspective reveals the onwards march of both the European Union and NATO as a historically contingent product of post-Cold War power-politics, rather than simply moral providence or rational inevitability, as claimed in the liberal canon. In so doing, Carr's realism calls for a sense of proportion and pragmatism when it comes to defending the post-Cold War European order as a value in-and-of-itself: a sense of proportion in acknowledging the role of Western hegemony – however enlightened – in its construction, and a pragmatism in taking into account the important role of changing balances of power between a self-interested West and Russia in shaping contemporary international society.

Furthermore, the assumption that liberal democracy and democratisation will lead to more peaceful relations with 'greater Europe' – that is, Europe including the former Soviet Union – will have to be cast aside. The more optimistic 'transition' models behind this idea have now been replaced by frameworks that consider the wide 'grey zone' between full totalitarianism and mature democracy as a more or less permanent (or at the very least *very* long-term) state of affairs. Both theoretically and empirically, the spread of democracy has proven far from inexorable. Moreover, read in terms of symbolic power, democracy becomes part of subtle power-play between Moscow and the West. For all their moral

content, democracy and democratisation must also be seen as part of the power-political, rather than a denial thereof. From that perspective, Western efforts at exporting democratic norms eastwards are inextricably linked to a Kantian – but nevertheless eminently geopolitical – grand project. Likewise, the Kremlin's recent attempts to subvert democratic processes in a number of Western countries should be read as an insurgent, frustrated attempt to subvert an unattainable value read primarily in terms of its *power-political* implications.

Finally, such a reformulation would entail the giving up of the liberal assumption that free-market and free-trade economics is *always* a positive-sum game to *everyone*, contributing to harmonious relations through the growing integration of, in this case, Russia, into the global economy. Moscow has clearly been aware of its structurally disadvantaged position within the capitalist system, leading to a much greater sensitivity to the power-political aspects of geo-economics, which it has also consistently perceived in zero-sum terms. For Moscow, natural resources are there to enhance the relative power of the state, both domestically and internationally. The Kremlin's attempts to counteract its disadvantage by coaxing its neighbours into integration projects through the crude application of hard power also emerge from this continued inequality. Western attempts to formulate new approaches towards pan-European security should take account of these realities, if only because of the risks associated with denying the power-political where it clearly remains relevant.

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